

[Open in app](#)

New: Navigate Medium from the top of the page, and focus more on reading as you scroll.

ium



Forbidden Realms

Okay, got it



Lyam Thomas Christopher

[Follow](#)Apr 23, 2022 · 20 min read · ✨ · [Listen](#)

Save



The Short Path to Enlightenment

The Difference Between Consciousness and Awareness



Many spiritual masters will insist with the utmost confidence that death is not the end. They will then proceed to “prove it” by saying strange, unscientific things about “consciousness.” Their observations about “awareness” that will almost convince us we are immortal.



158



7



And yet there always seems to be a point during the presentation when they throw up their hands and say, “Well, you can’t really prove any of this. You’ll just have to meditate and see for yourself.” We end up disappointed in them for not convincing us, and they appear disappointed in us for failing to see “the obvious.”

How does their unscientific argument usually go? Perhaps if we unpack it carefully, we can give it a chance and see the “obvious” point they’re trying to make.

The Argument

The entire universe, they will propose, is one vast, living organism, always conscious and always potentially aware. Consciousness is the only true constant within it, eternally present everywhere. It is the one thing that never changes. No matter where you look, consciousness always resides peacefully in the background behind every conceivable nook and cranny of creation, as well as behind every moment in time. The various roles and identities that human beings adopt in the *foreground* of life are merely borrowed from the more generalized, singular identity of consciousness that resides “hidden” in the *background* of all that is.

At the same time, this universal background vibrates. It fluctuates in many different ways, producing all of the phenomena of manifestation that arise in the foreground — from the high-frequency oscillations of atoms to the deep drone of a bass violin to the rising and falling of ocean tides. These waves of vibration also permeate your body — from the inhaling and exhaling of your breath to the wave-like undulations of intestinal peristalsis to the minutest oscillations of your brainwaves. In electricity, they apparently give rise to awareness, the ability to perceive and objectify the various phenomena around you. And always present in the invisible background, behind the oscillating brainwaves of the mind’s activity, there lies the peaceful, immutable stillness of pure consciousness.

(**Warning:** For many people, the last sentence in the previous paragraph is invisible. That is, they read it and simply gloss over it without comprehending and remembering what it says. If this has just happened to you, reread that sentence and make an attempt to thoroughly visualize and confront what’s being presented.)

“The lips of wisdom are closed, except to the ears of understanding.”

— William Walker Atkinson

The human brain cannot directly perceive the utter stillness behind everything. How could it? Pure consciousness doesn't move. Therefore, it is invisible, intangible, and utterly silent. So even as this utter stillness in the background constitutes who and what you truly are, your brain ignores it. The nervous system has evolved to focus, instead, on things that it can single out in the foreground, from the various phenomena that are comprised of motion and vibration.

This inherent blindness within the nervous system has led most humans to believe that the only things that truly exist are the phenomena produced by motion and vibration. We end up identifying with the vibrational patterns on the surface of reality, as opposed to the deep substance of reality itself: pure consciousness. And who could blame us?

Many masters will go on to say that your separate sense of self — your “personhood” — is an illusion. How so? Your self-image is a product of motion and vibration, and it's not really possible for motion and vibration to exist independently of the substance that is undergoing that motion and vibration. An ocean wave cannot exist independently of the ocean, so it's not really possible for you to exist *in and of yourself*, apart from the universe. You have not been created by God “over there” and then left stranded in the world “over here.” You are being created right now, “bodied forth” by nature. You cannot ever be something separate and distinct from the world. Therefore, you cannot be “cut off” from the heart of nature, from pure consciousness — even though it might feel like you've been “cast out of heaven” or “expelled from paradise” with the hope of some day returning. Humans only *seem* to exist in an external world, or in a fallen state, because of our inability to sense what isn't moving. Because of our apparent inability to sense the eye in the midst of the storm.

Even though your sense of being a separate self is an illusion, the masters will go on to insist that this illusion should be respected. Your self-image is a kind of projection or reflection, a representation in the foreground of who you really *are* in the background. Having a sense of individuality and personal integrity is perfectly fine then, since it can be an authentic representation of the oneness embodied by the entire cosmos. This is the true meaning behind the Bible's assertion that man is made in the *image* of God.

If this is so, then in some sense, death really *is* the end. Your personhood can die. As a projected image, it can be dissolved, just as the image of the Moon reflected in a pool of water can be disturbed and dissipated when you stir the water. However, no matter how agitated the water's surface becomes, the actual Moon itself remains whole and untroubled.

This means that the essence of who you truly are cannot die. When death comes for you, your shallow bandwidth of individual awareness wavers and disburses, leaving only the true Self shining in the depths of the universe. Individual awareness dissolves and returns back to pure consciousness.

And that's why your true individuality, at the deepest level, cannot be destroyed. You have always been, you always are, and you always will be. When you die, you don't even "go" anywhere. You are still right here where you've always been.

Obvious, right?

The Rebuttal

Well, let's get fussy for a moment. It's all too easy for a skeptic to poke a hole in this "consciousness is everywhere" argument. All we have to do is point out the simplest fact: A human being can be knocked unconscious. You can take a blow to the head and get knocked out by your sparring partner. You can black out from holding your breath too long. You can get put under by an anesthesiologist before surgery.

But there's no need for such dramatic examples. What about sleep? Every night, we appear to lose consciousness. Part of a human being's nightly cycle involves a deep level of sleep that is dreamless. In dreamless sleep, we seem to disappear into oblivion entirely. In the morning, we might be able to remember some of our dreams, but we will remember absolutely nothing about the time of night when dreamless sleep occurred.

This means that being knocked unconscious, for all intents and purposes, is the same as being dead. If drifting into total oblivion is possible every night, then death may just as well be the end. Death could simply be described as being knocked unconscious forever. There doesn't seem to be any solid evidence that we can regain consciousness after dying.

This is usually where our philosophical line of inquiry ends, and we are left stranded in our skins, worrying about our inevitable deaths just like all the other human beings on the planet. So much for immortality.

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”
— Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

The Comeback Remark

What we may not realize, however, is that some spiritual masters have a comeback remark that can rescue us from our angst. It’s a continuation of their “proof.” It not only casts doubt on humankind’s anxiety over death, but it also opens up a gateway to the short path. The short path to enlightenment.

The comeback remark goes something like this: “Dreamless sleep is not an absence of experience. It’s an experience of absence.”

You might want to repeat this remark several times, thoughtfully, and consider the implications. It’s not the easiest thing to wrap your head around. Ultimately, it’s an invitation to confront the darkness within. But there’s a trick to it. You’ve got to be able to think in terms of examples, analogies, and metaphors. Let’s unpack it then, one step at a time...

“Let me enter the path of darkness and, peradventure, there shall I find the light. I am the only being in an abyss of darkness; from an abyss of darkness came I forth ere my birth, from the silence of a primal sleep. And the voice of the ages answered unto my soul: ‘I am he who formulates in darkness — the light that shineth in the darkness, yet the darkness comprehendeth it not.’ ”
— from a Golden Dawn initiation rite*

Three Levels of Consciousness

To begin, let’s pretend that the mind functions on three different levels.

Level 1 - Wakefulness: First of all, there is the activity of the mind that constitutes our waking lives. This is what we experience in our daytime personas as we conduct business, walk the dog, wash the dishes, etc. As we proceed through our sunlight-filled day, we encounter various “objects.” A pen to write with, a mug to drink from, the

bodies of our pets, the bodies of other people, etc. When we encounter an object, that encounter creates an experience, so each day is filled with a variety of *experiences*.

Level 2 - Dream Sleep: The next level of consciousness is dream sleep. This normally occurs at the end of each sleep cycle, and dreams are the most intense in the early hours just before dawn. You might sleep in a completely darkened room, but you will continue to experience light and darkness in the dream world. You will continue to encounter pens, mugs, and the bodies of other entities, but these are not physical objects in the usual sense. They are *subtle* objects that arise in imagination. You even seem to have your own subtle body within the dream. When your dream body encounters the other subtle bodies in a dream, each encounter amounts to an experience. This means that both your waking life during the day and your dream life at night are filled with a variety of *experiences*.

Level 3 - Deep Sleep: The third level of consciousness is deep sleep, and it is completely dark. Not only is it utterly dark but it contains no objects to experience. Or so it seems. Deep sleep normally happens at around 2 or 3 a.m. If someone were to shake you awake during this time, you would be groggy, and just for a moment, you wouldn't know who or what you are. And you would remember nothing at all from immediately prior.

We tend to label dreamless sleep as “unconscious” because it seems to contain no light and no objects. As a result, we conclude that this level of consciousness has no experiences. *But this is not so*, and here we come upon the veil of ignorance that separates the unenlightened from the enlightened. There is still one remaining experience that characterizes level 3. We have trouble seeing it because it's so big.

These three levels — waking consciousness, dream sleep, and deep sleep — are the aspects of the mind that most people are aware of. They appear to be all that there is to who and what we are. However, there is another “secret level” behind them all. Level 4 exists beyond the experience of physical objects, beyond the experience of subtle objects, and most importantly, *beyond the experience of oblivion*. The ultimate goal of various spiritual practices is to “reach” this fourth level. Level 4 is the “light” in enlightenment.

It’s a bit misleading to refer to level 4 as a level. In the diagram above, it might be better to say that it is the white background from which the other three levels stand forth.

Level 4 is pure consciousness, and the key to understanding it involves taking a second look at level 3. In particular, it involves our perception of the darkness that supposedly envelops us in dreamless sleep. When we “black out,” are we really entering into some kind of black nothing? What is this black nothingness?

The problem with the black nothingness is that it is actually a subtle object. The level 3 of our supposedly dreamless sleep is actually still a dream. It may not contain a *variety* of objects for us to experience, but it still presents *one final* object: the black nothingness. This is what the enlightened masters are pointing to. Or rather, it was what they are pointing *through*. When a person blacks out, he or she is still experiencing one thing: the apparent nothingness. This nothingness is a subtle object created habitually by the mind. To understand why this is important, we're going to have to explore what an object is.

*“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before...”*

— Edgar Allan Poe

What Is an Object?

As you will recall, in levels 1 and 2, we encounter objects — physical objects in the physical world and subtle objects in the dream world. But there is a third kind of

object. The third kind is what we normally refer to as a concept. The mind is capable of making “objects” out of just about anything. Even out of vague, abstract experiences.

This is easy to understand. For example, we might be deciding whether or not it's necessary for us to own a car. In our deliberations, we create a list of “reasons why” and “reasons why not.” These reasons we would arrange into two columns, and if one column is taller than the other, our decision becomes easier to make. Each “reason why” or “reason why not” is not literally an object that we can grab onto, but still we have made it into a mental object. We are then able to grab onto it, figuratively speaking, and move it around upon the viewscreen of the mind. This is what it truly means to think “objectively.” Or to “objectify” the world around us.

Objectification is a powerful and dangerous trick of the mind. Most people blindly objectify almost everything in the world around them, not realizing that objects do not truly exist anywhere in the universe. When you look around yourself right now, you appear to be immersed in a sea of sensation. And your mind goes to work on this buzz of sensation and creates objects out of it — and you then pretend to exist within a world of objects that you can chase after and run away from. This process, for most of us, is compulsive and habitual.

A traditional Native American might stroll into an old-growth forest and see a majestic congregation of dignified giants (trees) towering into the sky. “Spirits! Gods!” He suspects that they have much wisdom to teach, if he can only be silent and patient enough with them to learn their secret language. A Victorian explorer, on the other hand, would enter the same forest and congratulate himself on discovering a new natural resource. “Lumber!” In both of these examples, the mind is objectifying what it sees, turning the uniform, fluid experience of reality into a world of separate, useful, and exploitable objects.

Whether an object is physical, subtle, or conceptual, it is always imaginal. Objects do not exist. They are creations of the mind. If this sounds absurd, you have some work to do. Read [Article #18](#) in *Forbidden Realms*.

The Difference Between Consciousness and Awareness

Ordinary human awareness considers itself “conscious” when there are objects to experience. In other words, when it is locked into an objectifying mode of perception.

What we don't seem to realize is that consciousness still exists outside of the objectifying activity of the mind.

At this point it can be helpful for us to create our own definitions of the words *consciousness* and *awareness*. Because the English language is not always conducive to describing enlightenment experiences, we must sometimes revise the definitions of already-existing words and invent our own vocabulary.

I've been defining the word *consciousness* as the same thing as *awareness*, but with one important distinction. I've been defining *awareness* as a state of mind that only exists when consciousness is fixated upon something — that is, when consciousness has become aware of an object in its apparent environment. When it is focusing on something that has arisen in perception. Or when it is identified itself with some kind of fictional object — as in when you say “I am a student” or “I am a mother.” Consciousness, on the other hand, exists independently of any object. Pure consciousness is what remains when your mind stops creating objects.

To be clear, these are not conventional definitions of *consciousness* and *awareness*. I am simply creating new definitions to point out the true nature of the mind. To open up the short path to enlightenment. Other spiritual teachers might reverse these terms, which ends up confusing anyone who doesn't hold the key. And I have just given you that key.

According to my definitions here, consciousness is the parent of awareness, and awareness is the offspring of consciousness. Awareness is merely a function of consciousness. It arises from its parent and disappears back into it. Consciousness, on the other hand, exists no matter what. It persists when there are objects present, and it persists when there are no objects at all.

As you can see, then, the goal of various Tantric practices is to enter the pure consciousness that exists behind awareness. Behind the perception of objects. Behind the duality of “Self versus other.”

How Do We Transition from Awareness to Consciousness?

How do we get out of this objectifying mode that characterizes awareness? Is it possible? Well, one way to do that involves simply going to sleep. When you drift off

each night, you eventually slip into dreamless sleep. Into a realm beyond all objects. Well, at least all objects but one. Only one object remains: the black nothingness.

You can also get out of your objectifying mindset by scrying. By staring into a dark surface such as a crystal ball made of smoky quartz. Or into a disk of obsidian. Or you can simply open the curtains during a dark night and stare out the window into the black nothingness.

An Obsidian Scrying Mirror

When you stare into a shiny black surface, how do you feel? Keep your gaze steady. Peer into the darkness without fear. Do not look away. You will eventually notice how your mind begins to produce a smoky haze, and then hallucinations. Faces or images of landscapes will arise as your mind tries to create some kind of object, some kind of experience to hold on to. It does this somewhat nervously, in an effort to avoid slipping

into oblivion. Into the chaos of formlessness. There seems to be a hungry void out there, doesn't there? A threatening emptiness that seeks to pull you in and snuff you out. Go into that apparent void. Find out what's really there.

The darkness of level 3 can be frightening because it reminds us of dying. If you suffer from a condition called sleep paralysis, you probably know what I'm talking about. In sleep paralysis, we can drift straight from level 1 to level 3, and this can literally feel like you are disappearing into oblivion and getting snuffed out of existence. The darkness might even take on an ominous shape, appearing as some kind of monster or boogeyman pushing down on your chest to smother you. What is this black monster? Where does it come from?

How does your mind objectify oblivion?

The Midnight Sun

To explore, let's do a little thought experiment. Consider what it's like to relax and float freely in the vast emptiness of outer space. The space between the stars surrounds you like a black abyss. Darkness seems to envelope you, to press in upon you as though it were some kind of dreadful barrier beyond which there is only an endless, hungry nothing.

But space isn't really like that, is it? Your mind makes it into some kind of menacing object when in actuality, there is no real object there at all. There is no wall. No shroud of doom. There isn't even an "abyss." These are all fictional constructs that the nervous system creates to protect itself from imaginary danger.

Floating freely in the zero gravity of outer space, you hold up a drinking mug before your eyes. You can see it! There is light bouncing off of it, entering your eyes. Where is the light coming from? From everywhere all around! Most obviously, it is coming from the stars, but it also suffuses all of space as the background static of electromagnetism from the Big Bang. Space may *appear* to be all dark, but when there's an object floating in it, that object lights up, revealing to us that there is light everywhere.

How strange! The light wasn't visible a moment ago. It only revealed itself when we presented some kind of object for it to bounce off of. We can't always see the light that's all around us, but it is ever present. Always there. Your perception of "darkness" is merely an objectification. In truth, there is no such thing as darkness. Only boundless space suffused with light.

Space Realm/Mind Realm

Now it's time for us to think analogously. Compare your experience of floating in space to an experience of floating in the midst of consciousness. The various objects that arise in your mind — whether those objects are considered physical, subtle, or conceptual — light up as they appear. You seem to be surrounded by walls of darkness (level 3), but all you have to do is visualize an object, and the ever-present light of consciousness lights it up, revealing itself as ever-present.

Physical objects, subtle objects, concepts — all three of these things obstruct pure consciousness. Light bounces off of them. But in the process of obstructing the invisible light, these objects light up and reveal its omnipresence. Any construct that arises in the mind does this. Your thoughts contain mental objects (whether subtle or conceptual), and mental objects float in the midst of pure, invisible consciousness. They are consciousness made visible. That's what awareness is: invisible consciousness made visible.

What this means is that level 3 of the mind does not actually exist! Level 3 is simply level 2 but with only one object left to confront: the darkness. And of course, when we examine that darkness, we begin to notice that we are merely making an object out of something that isn't even there. The only thing that's truly there is the unobstructed light of pure consciousness. As you pursue this analogy, you may begin to notice that these "levels" of the mind aren't really levels at all.

As you can see, level 3 of the mind is merely a dark-skinned monster created by a nervous system that's afraid of dying. The darkness might even feel tangible around us, like a wall or a heavy weight. Or it might seem like a vast, deep ocean full of vague, hidden threats. Or the devouring mouth of a deep, dark well. These perceptions are simply an attempt of the nervous system to fight against the traumatic forms of death that it remembers from countless eons of biological evolution. They are an attempt to stay "awake" on the surface level of reality, in level 1.

The hidden assumption appears to be this: If there are no objects to focus on, then you will cease to exist. To truly enter level 3 and beyond, we must confront and remove this assumption. We must stop making objects out of experience. And when all the

imaginary objects in our mind are finally gone, we should not allow ourselves to be deceived — because there is still one final object to dissolve: oblivion.

This final concept that looms before us must also be relinquished. It is the final phantom. Occultists sometimes refer to it as the dweller on the threshold, and they come up with all kinds of fanciful notions about it. In a previous article, I refer to it as the core trauma of our species — also known as the Devil. When we stop fabricating this oblivion monster, we break through level 3 and enter the boundless radiance of pure consciousness. We have discovered the Sun at midnight. The ever-present light of who and what we truly are.

For a deeper exploration of this “oblivion monster” — and for some powerful techniques for conjuring him up — see [Article #13](#) in *Forbidden Realms*.

Is this really possible? Is it possible to stay “awake” when there are no objects arising in awareness? This is an awkward question. Most people conceive of “awakeness” as a state of mind that is creating objects around itself. When there are no objects for the mind to cling to, most people assume that we are “unconscious.” And this is where the fun begins. The various practices of meditation and Tantra essentially involve exploring a world without objects, slipping beyond the object-making faculty of the mind while still remaining “awake.” When all objects vanish, we find that there is no such thing as unconsciousness. We find that what used to be our perception of a “blackout” was just a bad habit. Tantric practice helps us break this habit.

When darkness ceases to be an object to confront, the final barrier has been dissolved, and the midnight Sun of the universal mind reveals itself. Enlightenment actualizes. We are immortal.

Direct Pointing

Once we understand this schematic of the three levels of the mind (that do not actually exist), the short path to enlightenment opens up to us. All we have to do then is go after the bad habit of compulsive objectification and break it. We must train ourselves to let go of the belief that a world of objects is the only thing that exists. In doing so, we eventually find ourselves face to face with oblivion, the final barrier. Dissolving this final objectification brings us to enlightenment.

When this possibility is pointed out to us, spiritual practices such as meditation take on a completely different role in our lives. We have discovered the true goal of such practices: to dissolve awareness into pure consciousness. This is the short path to enlightenment.

Such an insight is so devastatingly simple that we tend to miss it. Usually, we require a spiritual master to point it out over and over until we finally get it. Receiving a “direct pointing” lesson is usually the first step. A teacher points out the true nature of the mind, distinguishing consciousness from awareness. This opens the student up to the possibility of dissolving awareness into pure consciousness. The next step, then, is for the student to apply spiritual practices with renewed vigor. Once the direct-pointing instruction has taken root, most of the bullshit that surrounds mysticism and magic simply evaporates. Progress on the path becomes simple, easy, and straightforward. Release from the make-believe world of objects is certain and inevitable.

*“Like the morning mist that dissolves into thin air,
Going nowhere but ceasing to be,
Waves of conceptualization, all the mind’s creation, dissolve,
When you behold your mind’s true nature...”*
— Tilopa

When there is no direct-pointing instruction, spiritual techniques are weak and barely effectual at all. They become feel-good strategies for relaxing at the spa. Or for obtaining some kind of mojo (competitive advantage) on your career path. Direct-pointing instruction provides the student with a compass by which he or she can navigate amidst these illusions. To cut through the make-believe world of objects with ease.

You might begin to see, then, that most of the articles in *Forbidden Realms* are attempts at direct pointing. I believe that a face-to-face teacher isn't always necessary for opening up the short path. It is possible to point out the true nature of the mind, even in writing. Once the reader glimpses the possibility of dissolving awareness into consciousness, all forms of spiritual practice become powerful. Enlightenment becomes achievable in a single lifetime.

[Meditation](#)[Enlightenment](#)[Consciousness](#)[Mindfulness](#)[Sleep](#)